



## **Former Foster Care Children Speak Out About Their Experiences in Foster Care and Priorities for Change in the Foster Care System**

Results of Interviews with 94 Former Foster Care Children, Age 18 and Older  
Conducted December 29, 2003 through January 14, 2004

Conducted by Lake Snell Perry & Associates for  
*The Future of Children*, a Program of The David and Lucile Packard Foundation

In conjunction with their release of the most recent issue of their journal *The Future of Children*, entitled "*Children, Families, and Foster Care*," The David and Lucile Packard Foundation commissioned this small survey of former foster care children. Lake Snell Perry & Associates (LSPA) conducted in-depth interviews with 94 foster care alumni to add their experienced voices to the discussion about needed changes in the foster care system.

Former foster care children feel children in foster care, like all children, need to be cared for and supported. Not only must their basic needs be met – which all too often they are not – but they must be nurtured and supported by foster parents, caseworkers and the system as a whole. Foster care alumni feel changes need to be made in the following areas to improve the lives and futures of foster care children:

- The health care and dental needs of all foster children must be met.
- Children in foster care must get the help and support they need to do well in school.
- The system must help foster children sustain sibling relationships.
- Foster parents must be carefully chosen, devoted, and must receive the training and support they need to nurture the children in their care.
- Caseworkers must receive the support and training they need to truly serve children and families.
- Children must be prepared for their transition to adulthood and receive some support and guidance during their first few years after emancipation.

Detailed findings follow:

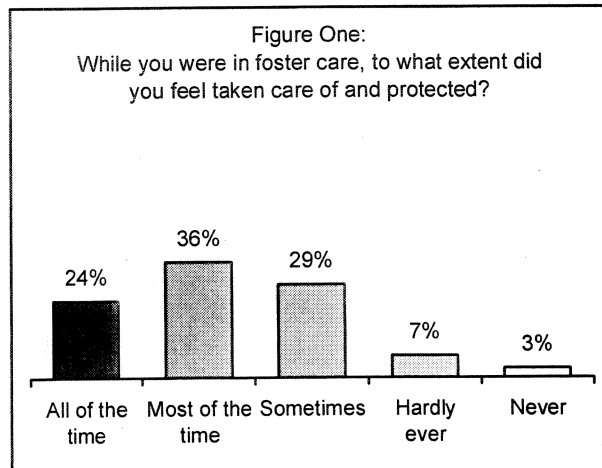
## DETAILED FINDINGS

**Children in foster care, at the most basic level, need to be taken care of and protected. These findings suggest we are failing children in this regard.**

*"I would like foster youth to feel that someone really cares for them, that they can be themselves."*

- Male, 22

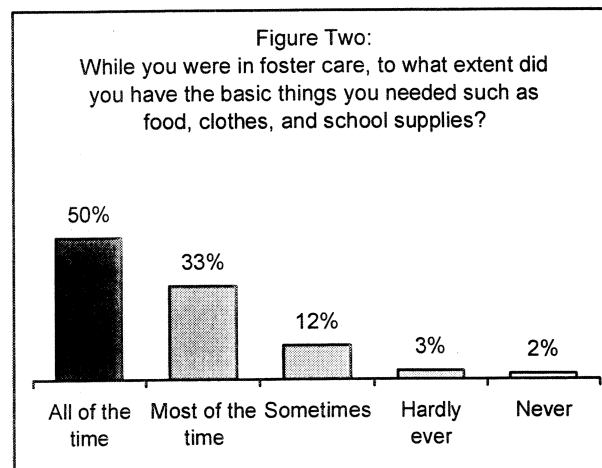
Alumni were asked to what extent they felt cared for and protected during their time in foster care. As Figure One shows, only a quarter (24%) say they felt protected and cared for of *all the time*; the majority did not. One in ten (10%) say they hardly ever or never felt taken care of and protected.



*"[They have to] support youth in the foster care program emotionally and socially. Be willing to listen to youth and [their] feelings because most of the time kids feel nobody cares."*

- Female, 24

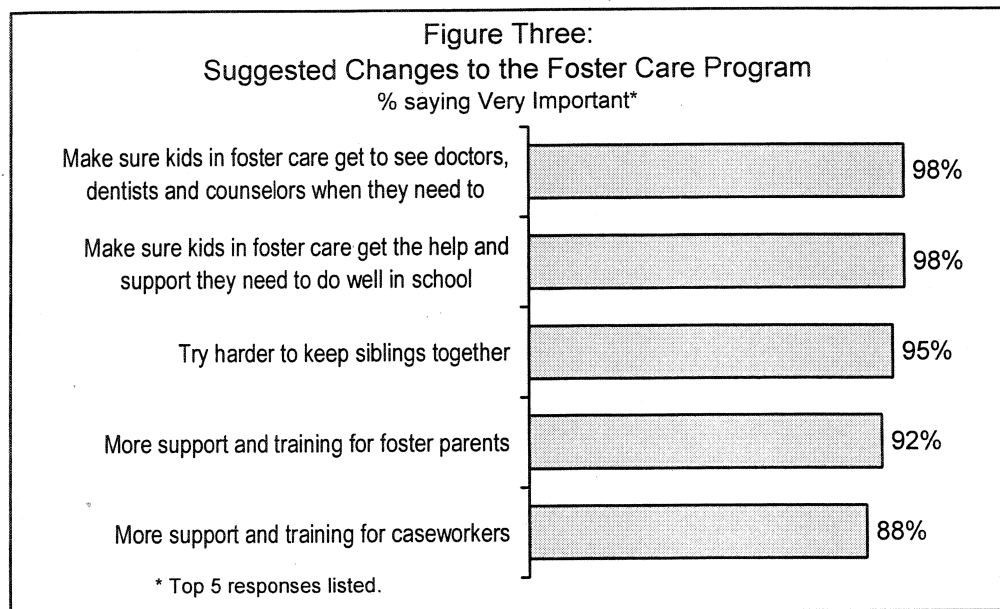
There is also evidence the basic needs of children in foster care are not being met on a consistent basis. Half (50%) of the alumni surveyed say they did not have their basic needs taken care of *all the time* during their years in foster care. (Figure Two) One in twenty (5%) say these needs were hardly ever or never met.



Participants' remarks make clear that children in foster care have basic needs beyond just food and clothing, and that these needs were sometimes neglected. As a 27 year-old woman explains, "The common emphasis is placed [on] meeting the basic needs of the child, needs like food, clothing and shelter and nothing above that .... There needs to be a genuine investment into these kids on all levels." Another female (age 27) explains, "The system does ... not value young kids needs by not asking them what is best for them. Things like placement, personal growth, activities, school and friendships. Things that a young kid needs to feel whole. I would like the system to value a young person's needs, to value what a young person says ..."

**Alumni offer specific recommendations for improving the system and moving toward fulfilling the needs of children in foster care.**

Participants were asked to rate the importance of a series of suggested improvements to the foster care system. The results, presented in Figure Three, show that alumni see a great need for improvements in a number of areas. Regular healthcare and help and support in school top the list, followed closely by keeping siblings together. Large majorities also call for more training and support for both foster parents and caseworkers.



Participants had specific recommendations for system improvements, in these and other areas, drawn from their own foster care experiences. Next we look in more detail at their suggestions for system change.

**Health care is central to well-being.**

An overwhelming majority (98%) of the former foster care children interviewed said it was very important to make sure kids in foster care get to see doctors, dentists and counselors when they need to.

Though most of these former foster care children appear to have gotten regular preventive care while in foster care, for some this basic need went unmet. Three-quarters (76%) say they went to the doctor for check-ups or physicals at least one a year. A quarter (24%), however, had check-ups less frequently, including one in seven (14%) who report that they went to the doctor for a check-up at most once or twice during their time in foster care. As one female alumna, age

*"When a child comes into foster care she needs dental care, medical care and a psychological evaluation. This should be done on a national level."*

- Female, 45

51, explains, "The medical needs [of foster children] do not get met. They move from one foster home to the next so their medical records are not kept up to date."

The story told by this 30 year-old female alumna illustrates the wide-ranging importance of good health care: "I had severe eczema and the doctors did nothing for me. I went through so much stress at school. The kids made fun of me. When I got adopted I was taken to a better doctor and was healed quickly and then my life changed."

### **Foster care children need help and support to succeed in school, and in life.**

Almost all (98%) of those interviewed said it was very important to make sure kids in foster care get the help and support they need to do well in school.

These former foster care children appear to have faced many challenges in getting the help and support they needed in school. Two thirds (66%) had to switch schools in the middle of the school year during their time in foster care. A quarter (23%) report that this happened four or more times. Seven in ten (71%) alumni say they had trouble with their school work at least occasionally, including over a third (36%) who say this happened often. Of those who had trouble in school almost a third (31%) say they hardly ever or never got the help they needed. The comments of this 20 year-old man illustrate the troubling outcome of this uneven schooling: "I have been in the foster care system since I was very little – four years old – and I still can't read very well. There needs to be more one to one. Kids need help to learn."

The news is slightly better in terms of extra-curricular activities. Almost two-thirds (64%) of those interviewed report that they took part in "after school activities like sports teams, dramatics, music or other clubs or activities" during the period they were in foster care. However, one in five (20%) say they never participated in any extra-curricular activities. The recommendations of this 24 year-old highlight the importance of extra-curricular activities. When asked what changes she most wants to see in foster care, she said, in part: "Allow kids to get involve in sports to boost up their self esteem and confidence." The comments of another alumna suggest that sometimes being a foster child got in the way of extra-curricular activities, and even school itself. She explained,

"Foster kids go to hundreds of different appointments. How do you expect them to succeed in school if they are never there? ... Psychological appointments, doctor appointments and counseling appointments always interfered with school and extra-curricular activities. I would get in trouble with my coach if I missed something and it didn't matter that it was something I had to do."

### **Maintaining sibling relationships is critical.**

Almost all these former foster care children (95%) say it is very important for the system to do more to keep siblings together.

*"When I was younger I always took care of my brothers and sisters. They would always tell me what was going on. I was like their mom. Family is very important to me, it hurt me a lot not to see them."*

- Female, 23

Roughly three-quarters (72%) of the former foster care alumni interviewed had siblings who were in foster care at the same time as them. Of those, only a quarter (24%) say they were always placed with their siblings. The majority (53%) say they were placed with their siblings some of the time and placed separately at other times. A quarter (24%) say they were never placed with their siblings.

Participants stress the importance of keeping siblings together. When placing siblings together is not possible, alumni feel it is vital to help foster care children maintain relationships with their siblings. Yet many say the foster care system made maintaining siblings time difficult or impossible. This 27 year-old female believes the foster care system should do more to promote sibling relationships. She explains,

*"My experience is that the system does not foster sibling relationships. They treat kids as an individual, not as a family. There needs to be a value placed on relationships... Social workers and foster parents need to understand the importance of family. They need to embrace the value and necessity of sibling relationships."*

Another young woman says, "I had a big problem with visiting my brothers and sister. I only saw them two times a year, if that many times."

Some participants also say they were not allowed to visit with their biological parents as often as they would have liked. A 22-year old female explains, "Visitation with your biological parents is a big thing. Sometimes it is not encouraged enough. When I was in foster care I was allowed to see them, but not enough."

### **Participants urge more training and support for foster parents. Caring, committed foster parents can make all the difference to a foster child.**

Over nine in ten (92%) say more support and training for foster parents is very important. Participants believe not all foster parents are given the support and training they need to care for the children in their custody. A 22 year-old woman explains, "I would want foster parents to be trained. There is so much they do not know.... Some foster parents get into it and do not know what to expect or how to talk to kids."

*"My foster parents did not know all my history in order to help me. Even though they did a good [job] raising me there was lack of communication ... My foster parents wished they had known all my history."*

- Female, 31

Participants say that, in their own experience, not all the foster parents who cared for them had their best interest at heart. A 22 year-old man explains, "Some foster parents do not treat foster kids like their own kids. Some are in it only for the money." Several of these former foster care children talked of homes in which they were abused or neglected.

Participants' stories and remarks also make clear that having good foster care parents can make all the difference. For example, a 24 year-old woman explains,

"I had eight or nine foster parents and only one really cared about me. She was a mother figure to me. She treated me as one of her own kids and sacrificed many times for me. I have been out of foster care for five years and she is still part of my life. She has helped me with college money and teaches me parenting skills."

Other participants also told stories of foster parents who gave them the love and support they needed. Participants remarks and experiences demonstrate that having the right foster parents – or the wrong ones – can make all the difference in the lives of the foster care children in their care.

Participants also believe that children in foster care are moved too frequently. As a 33-year old woman explains, "you get moved around so much from foster home to foster home, the foster parents get disinterested. My one change would be to give [foster children] more stability." This statement by a 41 year-old male underscores the importance of stability:

"Kids need the stability. If you give them stability they will excel in whatever they do. My brother and I were bounced around so many times that we became depressed. Finally, when we [were] placed in a stable home, our grades, attitude and everything we did improved."

### **Caseworkers play a critical role.**

Almost nine in ten alumni (88%) say more training and support for caseworkers is very important. They also stress the importance of having caseworkers who truly care for the children under their supervision.

*"[The biggest problem is the case load that the case workers have to manage. They just don't have enough individual time with the kids.]"*

- Female, 33

Participants emphasize that caseworkers play a critical role in the lives of foster children. As a 22 year-old male explains "[Caseworkers] have a lot of power to fix things...to make matters better in foster homes. [They have] power to make sure that kids get their basic needs met and are treated well." The comments of another 22 year-old male also demonstrate the importance of having a caring, dedicated caseworker. He explains:

*"[The biggest problem was] the case workers. I had five or six case workers and I was only in foster care for four years. I had to readjust to each one to be able to trust them."*

- Male, 19

"[There needs to be] better communication between the case workers and foster kids. A lot of the times [the caseworkers] did not visit us as often as they should have. If something goes wrong in the foster home, if there is a problem of some kind they do not see it because they don't visit. I was in a foster home for three years and was not treated well and they never saw this."

As a 27 year-old man, who is now a caseworker himself, explains, "The caseworkers have to show they care more....The caseworker is usually who the youth talk to about everything....The youth needs a caring caseworker."

Many also say that caseworkers' caseloads are too large, making it difficult for them to give the care and attention to individual children. The 27 year-old man quoted above explains, "They need less work load for caseworkers in order to personalize each case." A 21 year-old female explains, "Case workers are overloaded and too busy so they can not follow through on issues and concerns that effect children in the system."

#### **Alumni stress the importance of transitional preparation and support.**

This poll focused on alumni's experience while in the foster care system and their suggestions for improvements for children currently in foster care. However, our questions also elicited responses about the importance of transitional support, that is support for children in the important years after they first "age out" of foster care.<sup>1</sup> As an 18 year-old male explains,

*"[The biggest problem is a lack of] preparation for adult living at 18. No financial backing is given and a lot of times we are still in high school. No financial help, no family to turn to, and many times end up on the streets because we do not know what to do because it has been done for us all our lives ..."*

- Female, 19

"I think that foster children should be allowed more time to get on their feet to get more stabilized before they go into the real world. Right now I am struggling. I do not have a place to stay. I am now eighteen and just got out of the system and am staying with a friend who is into bad things. I haven't found my mom yet. It has really been hard. I have no one."

A 21 year-old female says, "When you turn 21 they just let you go. They need resources or support groups. The regular kids got parents, but we don't have anyone to help us. We need mentors or something."

Helping emancipated foster youth in the transition to adulthood is not only about supporting them financially, but giving them the skills to care for themselves. As a 23 year-old female suggests, "When you turn 18 you should be put in a program that teaches you how to live on your own and how to function as an adult in the world. [The class should] teach you things like how to pay rent [and] bills, how to get a license, grocery shopping and budgeting your money."

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<sup>1</sup> Children "age out" of foster care and transitional programs at different ages – from 18 to 21 – in different states.

In short, these former foster care children call for improvements in a number of areas. First and foremost, the basic need of all children in foster care must be met. The system must meet the healthcare needs of all foster children. Foster children also need more support in school and more help maintaining ties to their biological siblings and parents. The system also must do a better job training and supporting foster parents and caseworkers, and preparing foster children for life as adults.



## **APPENDIX A: A NOTE ON THE PARTICIPANTS**

Ninety-four former foster care children age 18 and older were interviewed for this project, including 63 women and 31 men. The average age of participants was 22, though there were participants as old as 56. This sample also echoes the racial and ethnic diversity of the foster care program; interviewees include 30 white foster care alumni, 26 African-American, 31 Hispanics, and seven participants who gave their race or ethnicity as other or mixed.

These alumni spent a great deal of their youth in foster care. The average time in foster care of those interviewed is seven years. A third of participants (34%) spent ten or more years in foster care. These participants also report moving frequently. During their time in foster care, they had an average of five placements and third (35%) lived in seven or more homes. These alumni also experience a variety of types of placements. Almost nine in ten (86%) spent time in a traditional (non-relative) foster home, two-thirds (65%) were placed at some point in a group home or residential program and a third (36%) were placed with relatives at some point.

These former foster care children are involved in four programs – California Youth Connections, Casey Family Programs, Baptist Child and Family Services and the Preparation for Adult Living Program of the Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services. Staff at these programs helped LSPA recruit project participants.

It is important to note that this is not necessarily a representative sample of foster care alumni. All the participants are involved in one of the programs listed above, which suggests they are activists on their own behalf, and perhaps in the name of foster care children and alumni in general. Several work in the foster care field. In short, these alumni are likely more pro-active and involved than average foster care alumni. Therefore, their answers may be different than the answers these questions would have elicited from a more representative sampling of foster care alumni.

**APPENDIX B:  
MORE SUGGESTIONS AND REMARKS FROM  
FORMER FOSTER CARE CHILDREN**

*"[There needs to be] more contact with the children, checking up on them. See how they feel about where they're at, and if they are not happy find out why and fix it."*

- Male, 22

*"[There needs to be changes in] The experience when you first meet your foster parents. There needs to be pre-placement meetings before you move in, a chance for the kids to meet the family and to see the home they are going to live in."*

- Female, 25

*"I had a big problem with visiting my brothers and sister. I only saw them two times a year, if that many times. The case worker would give me a phone card to have phone contact with them, but I didn't know where they were. The case worker told me that their phone numbers changed and she did not know the new number. We should be able to have contact visits every three months and a telephone call every week. Sometimes for their birthdays I didn't have a telephone number or an address and thought that maybe they thought I didn't think about them. It would be very hard for me because I didn't know how they were doing in school and everything else."*

- Female, 20

*"[There needs to be] more oversight by adults to check on the welfare of the child, not necessarily a social worker or a relative. [In] my own experience, a lot of time when the social workers came to the house my foster parents put on a good show. I was abused but afraid to speak out in fear of retribution from my foster mother. I was used as a live in maid...like Cinderella."*

- Female, 45

*"Transitioning out of foster care is what distressed me the most and caused me a great deal of suffering. There were no psychological tools to enable me to transition from home to home and then from my foster home back to my biological parent .... When I eventually moved back with my biological father he also needed the tools to deal with this. I was nine years old and needed a hot line or social worker or some sort of resource to get help and guidance. There was no advocate for me. Both families were ill equipped."*

- Male, 38

*"Everyone [should] work together in a partnership – caseworkers, judges, teachers and children – everyone in the decision making including ... the young person."*

- Female, 20

*"Be willing to listen to youth and feelings because most of the time kids feel nobody cares."*

- Female, 24

*"I've been both in the system and a case worker and I wanted to make changes as a caseworker. You can have the best intentions going into it, but you can't do that much of a change because of the case load and there is always some kind of crisis. I walked into 30 families and 75 kids. With that case load its next to impossible to make good changes and keep up with everyone. The system needs a major overhaul."*

- Female, 31

*"I think [the biggest problem is] lack of communication. You could never get hold of your social worker, attorney, caseworker, the adults. Everyone needs to know the same plan for the child. The social worker would say one thing and the attorney would say another and the case worker wouldn't know anything about it. Everyone needs to get together and have a consistent plan for the child."*

- Female, 20

*"I don't think relative placement happen enough and if they do, it is not supervised. When I was placed with a relative in a different state I was never seen by a social worker and I was abused. It got out of hand and I was removed."*

- Female, 18

*"There are a lot of inequalities. If you do not have major problems people are more likely to help you, but if you have a lot of issues you are put aside, institutionalized and given medicine."*

- Female, 20

*"The case loads are too heavy, between paper work, in service training, court and the new children coming into the system there is not enough time for these workers to make the proper home visits."*

- Female, 56

*"In my case, I got very little interaction between the case workers and judges. No one asked me anything [such as] what is your long term goals and no one talked about permanency planning. No one talked about schools and programs that are available to help me out when I was emancipated. No body told me about the independent living program. Throughout my whole time in foster care I never heard anyone talk about me being adopted."*

- Male, 23

*"When I was in foster care I did not get enough family visits. This made me feel I was not loved."*

- Female, 24

*"They need to hire more social workers. They need more men in the field and not so many women."*

- Female, 19

*"Kids are bounced around too much. They need to support existing families. If they tried harder to prevent the kids from being bounced from one place to another and focused more on giving support to the correct family for the child, then the children would be better off."*

- Female, 31

*"[They need to] see children as people instead of pieces of paper that they are shoveling from one place to another."*

- Female, 56

*"The adults in the system have nothing at stake if I do well or not."*

- Male, 22

*"They need to put the kids first all the time. Sometimes they are there for the kids in the beginning but, then they care more about keeping the employees that work for them like house parents and office staff."*

- Male, 20

*"I think that its not personalized enough. I think kids get lost in the system. There's not enough interaction with their caseworkers. They don't know what's going on with the child."*

- Female, 41

*"Some kids are scared to speak up because they might get punished or they wouldn't believe them. Case workers should take kids to the park or to go out to a restaurant. They need to get the kids to trust them, so the kids will tell them what is going on and to believe them. They should make more phone calls."*

- Female, 21

*"Caseworkers have so many kids it is hard for them to focus on just one kid because they are so busy. I didn't talk to [my caseworker] that much. I would have liked her to call me more. I was pretty independent but I would have liked to talk with her more to let her know how I am doing."*

- Female, 22

*"In my case they kept on putting us – my brothers and sisters – back with our parents and it wasn't getting better. We had so many different case workers. They all didn't look at the files, and some thought maybe we should give [our parents] another chance.... I have been in the system for 14 years, back and forth, from foster care back home then to different families, etc. and it could have stopped long ago. Instead of putting us through that they should have known the third time not to put us back into our abusive family home. They make it like we are going on vacation for awhile and then putting us back with our biological parents and then out again. I can't remember how many times this happened. It just happened too many times and that is why I do not like the system."*

- Female, 18

*"When I was in foster care they said I was insane, that I had a disorder of the brain. So, they sent me to a mental hospital. They said I didn't know what I was talking about. They said I was low functional, but in high school I made A's and B's, and was in the reserves and became a second lieutenant....They would say, "Oh, I thought you would be in prison by now"!....My last foster home was great and it took them six years to put me there. They were spiritual people. They really cared. They weren't putting on a front. I was taken away from a family I loved. The system should care about children and not just act like they do because it is a job."*

- Male, 18